

(August 6, 2008) Southwest News Herald:Metra Service on Weekends?

Lipinski Holds Discussion To See If Trains Can Run More Often

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Finding a way to offer weekend service on Metra's SouthWest Service line, which serves Oak Lawn and nearby communities such as Chicago Ridge and Worth, was the focus of a roundtable discussion Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd) held July 28 at Toyota Park in Bridgeview with local politicians and railroad officials.

Among those joining him for the breakfast meeting were Oak Lawn Village Manager Larry Deetjen, several suburban mayors, state senators Ed Maloney (D-18th) and Christine Radogno (R-41st), and officials from Metra, RTA and freight railroads.

The SouthWest commuter line runs on tracks leased from Norfolk Southern Railway to cover the 40 miles between Chicago's Union Station and Manhattan, with several stops in Chicago, as well as Oak Lawn, Chicago Ridge, Worth, Palos Heights, Palos Park, Orland Park and New Lenox.

"I've had a lot of constituents ask me about weekend service, especially in places like Oak Lawn and Chicago Ridge. With gas prices being so high, people are really hurting and this is a great opportunity to help people," said Lipinski.

Phil Pagano, executive director of Metra, said he was "coming to this process with an open mind."

He said it would probably be feasible to add a few trains on Saturday as a pilot program. However, he was more cautious about Sunday, noting that Norfolk Southern Railway leases the tracks to Metra and other freight lines cross the tracks, so their schedules must be considered.

He pointed out that when the rail line was extended to New Lenox and Manhattan a few years ago, Norfolk Southern and several other railroads that cross the line reconfigured their schedules and put more freight trains on Saturdays and Sundays.

Chuck Allen, representing Norfolk Southern, noted that there are six major crossings on the SouthWest Line where other railroads interface with his, and 180 freight trains cross the line on a daily basis.

While stating that Saturday is the busiest day on the railroad, he agreed that all the railroads and agencies involved could

work together to provide limited weekend service.

Pagano said the project could cost between \$200 million and \$300 million above what has been allocated through the CREATE (Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency) program aimed in part at improving railroad grade separations and other infrastructure.

And Steve Schlickman, executive director of the RTA, which partially funds Metra, said there is some money set aside in the budget for pilot programs such as this.

"I want to thank everyone for increasing the service to what it is now...but I think there is a need to add at least some weekend service," said Lipinski.

The congressman suggested that adding three round trips on Saturday, and hopefully Sunday, would be a good starting point, "to see what kind of a response we get."

He said he didn't want to dwell on the fact that a capital bill that would provide transportation funding is stalled in Springfield. But as a member of the House Transportation Committee, he said he would make funding a priority when Congress discusses a new transportation bill next year.

Pagano also said the pilot program would be studied to determine if weekend service on the SouthWest Line brings new commuters or just takes riders from nearby lines such as the Rock Island, which he said is not heavily traveled on weekends.

Offering evidence that weekend service would attract new riders, Deetjen said he counted 60 people waiting on the train platform in Oak Lawn on the Fourth of July, when there were no trains running.

"They were potential new users," said Deetjen, who said those he spoke to were disappointed to learn there was no train service on weekends and holidays in Oak Lawn.

"If we really want to encourage people to take advantage of all the museums and cultural activities a metropolitan area offers, this would be the way to do it," said Deetjen.

"From our experience in Oak Lawn, we would be tickled if we even got two trains scheduled on the weekends," the village manager said.

He said that in addition to local residents using the train to go into Chicago, people from the city could take it in the opposite direction to visit attractions such as the new 11,000 sq. ft. Oak Lawn Children's Museum being built beside the train station on 95th Street.

Adam Woodworth, the director of the museum, was also there, and said that between 100,000 and 150,000 people are expected to visit the relocated museum annually when it opens.

It was pointed out that the new service would generate revenue for Metra, but Pagano said that it would not balance out the costs because weekend tickets are less expensive.

He also maintained that many people just find it more convenient to drive on weekends.

The Christmas season was suggested as a possible time to have the service ready, because of the high volume of people who would be going downtown to shop. But Pagano and others said that while a trial run might be possible then, the pilot program likely won't get under way until Feb. 1.

With that date in mind, it was agreed that by Oct. 1 Metra should be able to draw up a proposal setting out how to put the plan in motion.

"I'm very happy about what has come out of the meeting. It looks like by next spring, we will have a pilot program with a few trains on Saturday and probably Sunday to see how much it is used. That is all we can ask for right now," said Lipinski.